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DOI: 10.35765/pk.2021.3504.23

Contemporary Polish Community Media and Democracy. An Example of Catholic Periodicals

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to show the general situation of Catholic periodicals under the current democratic system. The author provides an analytical definition of the journals, followed by a dedicated typology. The discussed periodicals, which represent the class of community media, have all played an important religious, cultural and political role at some point in history. The selection of this particular research topic is justified by the shortage of in-depth studies on this important media segment. The interdisciplinary study takes the form of a compilatory review, illustrating obvious correlations between media and politics through the example of Catholic periodicals. The article uses the following methods: literary and critical analysis, as well as media and press content analysis.

KEYWORDS: media, politics, Catholic periodicals, Polish press, typology

STRESZCZENIE

Współczesne polskie media środowiskowe a demokracja. Przykład czasopism katolickich

Celem opracowania jest ukazanie ogólnej sytuacji czasopism katolickich w obecnym systemie demokratycznym. Autorka przedstawia analityczną definicję czasopism, a następnie dedykowaną im typologię. Omawiane periodyki należą do mediów wybranego środowiska i w różnych okresach historii odgrywały ważną rolę religijną, kulturową i polityczną. Wybór tematu badawczego jest uzasadniony niedostatkiem pogłębionych studiów nad tym ważnym segmentem mediów. Interdyscyplinarne studium ma formę kompilacyjnego przeglądu, ilustrującego oczywiste korelacje między mediami a polityką na przykładzie czasopism katolickich. W artykule zastosowano następujące metody: analizy i krytyki piśmiennictwa oraz analizy zawartości mediów i prasy.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: media, polityka, czasopisma katolickie, prasa polska, typologia

Suggested citation: Kristanova, E. (2021). Contemporary Polish Community Media and Democracy. An Example of Catholic Periodicals.   *Perspectives on Culture*, 4(35), pp. 405–414. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2021.3504.23.

Submitted: 27.10.2021

Accepted: 03.12.2021

Introduction

Polish Catholic periodicals can undoubtedly be classified as community media, having had a long-standing publishing tradition (since the 1830s) and having played an important religious, cultural and political role in various historical periods. Alas, they nowadays amount to a meagre 3% of the total circulation within the press market, and, to this day, they have been a subject of neither general nor comprehensive scientific studies. Therefore, this paper, the main purpose of which is to show the general situation of the Catholic periodicals and their typology, opens with their definition.

Fundamental questions that any contemporary researcher of the Catholic press faces are related to its present situation, operations, number and diversity, reasons behind any closures, and publishing and marketing policies. Another justified aspect is to determine a typology for these periodicals. For this purpose, the author reviewed online press directories, bibliographies, catalogues of Polish seminary libraries and Catholic universities (with regard to subscriptions to the journals in question), and created a list of the most prominent and frequently recurring titles. These were then compared with the census of Catholic periodicals provided in the statistical yearbook entitled *The Catholic Church in Poland 1991–2011* (Warszawa 2014). The typology that follows includes the most important examples, taking into account the currently vital segment of e-publications.

Methodology

The scientific rationale behind the subject was the lack of any keen interest among press experts (historians, political or media scientists) to conduct general and comprehensive studies of Catholic periodicals. Władysław Marek Kolasa once wrote that “typological division raises most serious doubts. The issue is objectively complicated, and in fact, there are no proper attempts to resolve it in press studies” (Kolasa, 1999, p. 108). Discussing examples, he could only list one typology, compiled by Adam Lepa sometime ago (1985, pp. 171–180). The purpose behind the research described hereinafter was also a comparative and qualitative assessment of Catholic periodicals, based on interviews with their editors (Częstochowa-based “Niedziela” and the long-extinct monthly “Miejsca Święte”)¹.

Importantly, the definition of Catholic periodicals entails a Catholic worldview and Christian ethics as the most significant elements of the

1 Namely, Fr. Mariusz Frukacz, the editor-in-chief of “Niedziela”, and Fr. Roman Tkacz (SAC), the main originator of “Miejsca Święte”.

media message. These journals remain formally connected with the hierarchical Church and its (diocesan or monastic) authorities through the post of ecclesiastical assistant, being responsible for the conformity of the content with principles of faith. Broadly speaking, the status of Catholic periodicals (as opposed to secular publications) is granted – pursuant to official Church documentation – to journals adhering to the principle of the primacy of truth and evangelisation (Śpiewak, 2019, p. 160). At the same time, it is emphasised that their message must be authentic, though not by manipulative techniques.

The development of the Catholic press after the Second Vatican Council was conditioned by Church Acts on the importance of media in evangelisation (Śpiewak, 2018, p. 160). As a result, the media content had to be concordant with the requirements stipulated in official Church documentation, and, primarily, within the *Inter mirifica* decree, and the pastoral instructions: *Communio et progressio* and *Aetatis novae*. In the post-conciliar period, Catholic press was divided into ecclesiastical, Catholic, Catholic Faithful, and pro-Catholic (supporting Catholic postulates). After 1989, Catholic-profiled titles have also been bound by media laws and marketing laws, just like any other periodical, which obligates their editorial boards to obtain a licence (Sieńczyło-Chlabicz, 2015).

Contemporary Catholic periodicals – facts and figures

In 21st-century Poland, the total circulation of the Catholic press amounts to 1.2–1.3 million copies, yet only 5% of Poles declare that they read it (Przeciszewski). Data from 2011 shows that among all 496 press titles, 258 had a religious profile. As for periodicity, the largest class were quarterlies and monthlies – 130 (*Ruch wydawniczy w liczbach*, Warszawa 2012). However, analyses made in 2013 revealed 492 periodicals were registered under the class „religion and theology” (*Ruch wydawniczy w liczbach*, Warszawa 2015). Alas, official Church institutions do not keep statistics for the parish press, which makes the segment rather difficult to assess. Other sources show that out of the total 10,201 Catholic parishes, 2,049 published their own newspapers between 2011 and 2012. A valuable initiative once undertaken by lay Catholics was the website PrasaParafialna.pl, which later ceased posting and is no longer updated today (*Prasa parafialna jako przykład prasy sublokalnej*). For these reasons, the exact number of Catholic titles in Poland is difficult to determine. It is also partially because the National Library only distinguishes the overall class of religious institutions, updated on the basis of copies sent by publishers pursuant to the statutory obligation, which some fail to comply with. Another factor that

impedes the assessment of the circulation of the Catholic press is the fact that publishers are often reluctant to share such information.

After the 1989, political transformation brought privatisation and decentralisation of the media, and many journalists left Catholic editorial boards for newly established media, a fact which coincided with a steady drop in the number of readers. In general, the total number of periodicals in Poland has been gradually decreasing, as evidenced by national data on active titles between 2010 and 2018. In 2010, readers could choose from 7,604 journals, while in 2015, the number declined to 7,132, then to 7,107 in 2016, and 6,939 in 2017. By comparison, daily newspapers have been more stable and recorded a less dramatic drop: in 2010 there were 51, and in 2017 – 46 (Concise Statistical Yearbook of Poland 2018, p. 231).

After this period, the 2019 indicators showed an upward trend, with as many as 7,234 registered titles. Interestingly, the Concise Statistical Yearbook of Poland (2019, p. 231) provides data divergent to the figures above – namely, a higher number for 2017: 7,433 journals (as opposed to 6,939 hereinabove). Thus, according to this source, 2017 showed an upward trend when compared to the years before and after.

Additionally, it is worth citing the 2018 results for the class “religion and theology,” *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland* (published in 2019) lists a total of 529 periodicals (p. 431),² which is concordant with the data in the 2018 Culture Report, and indicates an increase in comparison to 2016, when the class had 505 titles (approx. 5%). In 2018, the number of titles published in Poland decreased by 227 when compared to the previous year (from 7,433 in 2017 to 7,206 in 2018, i.e., by 3.1%). The dominant class according to UNESCO’s classification was “sociology and statistic” (2,169 titles; 30.1% of all periodicals), while “religion and theology” was represented by 529 titles (7.3%) (Kultura w 2018 r.). These statistics illustrate the changes that have been taking place on the Polish press market, and show how difficult it is to obtain accurate information on Catholic community periodicals.

Typology

In order to observe volume standards, this paper contains a brief description of existing typologies, followed by the author’s own, expanded with those press titles that represent particular subclasses and prove the author’s knowledge and press content analysis. However, the paper does not discuss editorial and formal features of individual periodicals.

2 Mostly quarterlies, followed by semi-yearlies (178), yearlies and irregulars (150), monthlies (118), bimonthlies (58), and other (25).

To begin with, one must recall the simplest, best-known and most universal periodicity criterion that divides press into: dailies, weeklies, biweeklies, monthlies, quarterlies, semi-yearlies, yearlies and irregulars. As for the reach, the following classes are distinguished: international, nationwide, local (diocesan), and sub-local (parish, decanal), while the publisher's criterion classifies periodicals as:

- for the Church hierarchs (curia and episcopate),
- religious,
- for catholic associations, societies, organisations and movements,
- for universities
- for parishes,
- private.

With regard to target audience, periodicals are customarily divided into publications for adults, women, children and youth, the clergy, the intelligentsia, catechists, altar boys, the sick, but also familial, missionary, aimed at Catholic movements, etc. A logical typology was applied by Adam Lepa (1999), who classified Catholic periodicals intended for:

- the faithful,
- pastors and theologians,
- monks,
- catechists,
- the youth.

However, it is Kolasa's division – concerning the Catholic press in Krakow only, though still quite universal – that appears to be most appropriate (Kolasa, 2006) as to the classes it proposes, namely:

- Catholic periodicals on religious spirituality, of charitable and caring movements, Catholic associations, for children and youth, socio-religious, and other (missionary and pilgrimage);
- the parish press;
- the diocesan pastoral press;
- theological journals;
- the monastic press (Kolasa, 2006, p. 107).

For the reasons stated hereabove, the author decided to provide her own typology, based on the criterion of subject matter, which consists of the following classes:

- socio-cultural and religious periodicals, which are highly professional and to this today have a powerful impact on the worldview of Catholics ("Gość Niedzielny," "Tygodnik Powszechny," "Idziemy," "Przegląd Powszechny," "Frona," "Znak," "W drodze," "Więź," "WpiS," "Czas Serca");

- periodicals for families (“Przewodnik Katolicki,” “Posłaniec Świętej Rodziny,” “W Naszej Rodzinie,” “Tak Rodzinie,” “Źródło,” “Moja Rodzina,” “Nasza Arka,” “Cuda i Łaski Boże”);
- missionary periodicals (monthly and bimonthly, e.g., “Misjonarze Kombonianie,” “Misje Dzisiaj,” “Misjonarz,” “Ziemia Święta”);
- theological and pastoral periodicals for priests, catechists, educators (“Animator,” “Ateneum Kapłańskie,” “Biblioteka Kaznodziejska,” “Msza Święta,” „Egzorcysta,” „Homo Dei,” “Katecheta,” “Wychowawca,” “Współczesna Ambona”);
- theological and scientific periodicals (“Collectanea Theologica,” “Communio,” “Studia Teologiczne,” “Przegląd Biblijny,” “Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny”);
- periodicals on Christian spirituality (“Życie Duchowe,” “Zeszyty Karmelitańskie,” “Głos Karmelu,” “Życie Konsekrowane”);
- periodicals for Catholic communities and movements (“Apostolstwo Chorych,” “Kotwica,” “List,” “Nowe Miasto,” “Szum z Nieba,” “Wieczernik,” “Oaza,” “Legio Mariae,” “Zeszyty Odnowy w Duchu Świętym,” “Życ Ewangelią”);
- publications for the general public, i.e., devotional periodicals for a wide audience (“Niedziela,” “Rycerz Niepokalanej,” “Apostolstwo Chorych,” “Posłaniec Serca Jezusowego,” “Któż jak Bóg,” “La Salette”);
- periodicals for young people (“Droga,” “ESPE,” “HIT,” “Jezus Żyje,” “Nasza Droga,” “Miłujcie się,” “RUAH”);
- periodicals for children (“Mały Gość Niedzielnny,” “Mały Przewodnik Katolicki,” “Mały Rycerzyk Niepokalanej,” “Mały Pielgrzym,” “Anioł Stróż,” “Dominik idzie do Pierwszej Komunii Świętej,” “Jaś,” “Świat Misyjny,” “KnC”);
- periodicals for women (“Pani”);
- news bulletins (“Wiadomości KAI) and titles published by official Church bodies (“Wiadomości Archidiecezjalne Warszawskie,” “Wiadomości Archidiecezjalne in Katowice,” “Wiadomości Diecezjalne Łódzkie”); and
- parish periodicals (e.g., “Gazeta Parafialna” – a weekly journal of the Parish of St Theresa and St John Bosco in Łódź).

The classification reveals how diverse contemporary Catholic periodicals are in terms of content, subject matter and target audience. There is a wide selection of missionary, opinion, and popular periodicals. Almost all (apart from a few parish titles) run their own websites, while the vast majority of the most prominent journals also provide e-editions. Most high-end periodicals do not narrow their scope of interest to religion only, also discussing political and socio-cultural issues, while their editorial

teams go to great lengths to meet the modern readers' expectations by making the graphic design visually attractive. As for parish periodicals, it must be stressed that, due to their unique nature, they require a separate study, in fact, all Catholic periodicals deserve to have more typologies compiled in the future.

Conclusions

The 21st century Catholic community press still plays an integral role among its readers. After the 1989 socio-political transformation, the Polish Catholic press entered the free market, where it has had to acquire funds and attract readers. However, the most important and effective way of promoting Catholic periodicals has remained unchanged – announcements issued at the end of the Mass. Nowadays, editorial boards attempt to keep up with the new technological media developments (Pethe, 2017, pp. 27–41), and thus, the majority of the Catholic periodicals have a website and an e-issue, while some even run large-scale online services. Titles are also advertised on social media (Facebook, YouTube). The communal aspirations to sway lay Catholics and perform an evangelisation function can still be observed among the best-known weeklies: “Gość Niedzielny” and “Niedziela,” which also applies to their diocesan editions. Their boards also make every effort to make advertisements modern and attractive.

Smaller publishing initiatives have also been successful during the researched periods, despite a subsequent drop in readership, as evidenced by the pilgrimage monthly “Miejsca Święte” (1997–2011) or the Polish version of “Magazyn Familia” (2008–2011) (Kristanova, 2017, pp. 267–283). A painful loss to the Catholic community was the 2012 closure of the paper edition of “Przegląd Powszechny” due to “market requirements,” followed by its incorporation into the Deon.pl website.³ Other editorial teams that faced serious financial difficulties were “Tygodnik Powszechny,” “List” and “Więź,” but they have managed to overcome the crisis.

3 ‘Przegląd Powszechny’ ceased publication. Retrieved from: <https://pch24.pl/przeglad-powszechny-przestal-sie-ukazywac/> (access: 18.04.2021).

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